

the good shift

**Learning Towards Zero**  
Learning in + from Practice in Systems Innovation

This booklet was created by The Good Shift (formerly the Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation), drawing on work undertaken in partnership with the Brisbane and Logan Zero projects across the period 2021-2024. The Zero Initiatives are large-scale, place-based and collaborative approaches to reducing, preventing and ending rough sleeping and homelessness built out of the ‘Advance to Zero’ methodology (see: <https://aaeh.org.au/atoz-resources>).

We see this booklet as a ‘Learnbook’ - a way to share the learnings from this work in ways that start in the messiness of context, and draw out questions, insights and opportunities. The Learnbook aims to share core insights from the Zero initiatives in Brisbane and Logan that could inspire others who are collaborating towards systemic shifts. These insights are shared in the spirit of Working Out Loud from action *within a context*. The Learnbook is not a universalisable ‘recipe’ book that can be applied in *any* context or all systems-shifting initiatives. As always, working to shift complex, human initiatives requires a lens that gives primacy to context, culture and contextual knowledges. We seek to build on and share insights from practice in specific contexts to develop deeper possibilities for learning forward towards addressing the challenges we are facing locally and globally.

The participants in the Zero Brisbane and Logan projects are central to the creation of this work. We wish to thank the leaders of the two organisations who initiated this work - Karyn Walsh (Micah Projects) and Cath Bartolo (YFS) who created the opportunity to work in ways that reflected a complexity-informed approach to learning and evaluation. The core Zero teams in Brisbane and Logan worked tirelessly on and in the initiatives- there are too many to acknowledge personally, but we thank you for your work. Special thanks to Karyn Walsh, Carmel Haugh and Paulina Tapia for support and encouragement to produce this additional report.

The team at the Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation, and then later at The Good Shift were involved in the groundwork and analysis that has contributed to the report - special thanks to Joanne McNeill, Celeste Alcaraz, Jai Allison, Laurel Johnson and Cathy Boorman for your contributions to this work.

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# Introduction

In early 2021 we were asked to support two initiatives in South-East Queensland by undertaking a developmental evaluation of how they collaborated across multiple partners to reduce, prevent and ultimately end homelessness. The initiatives, Brisbane and Logan Zero, started with the [‘Advance to Zero’ methodology](#), and adapted this as they progressed.

We were asked to track how contributors collaborated to tackle the systemic nature of this challenge. This gave us the opportunity to work with both initiatives over a two year period to reflect back to them how change was happening towards the outcome, and to track learnings focused on systemic change along the way.

While the [evaluation report](#) captures the details of this exploration, there were a myriad of insights from the process that could inform other systemic innovation initiatives - so this Learnbook outlines these. So much can be learnt from these initiatives that could help others seeking to create multi-sector and multi-organisation alliances for systemic change.

***Systemic work is, by its very nature, complex work.***

Anyone who is embarking on this type of work needs to be comfortable with learning forward, and working with diverse approaches that are context dependent. We share learnings not to suggest that this is ‘the’ way to undertake systems innovation, but to ***share one way that is showing promise in a particular context.***

This Learnbook outlines four key insights that could inform systemic change initiatives.

- 1 Human systems are complex and dynamic. When we are working in complex domains, we need to ‘learn forward’.
- 2 Shifting systems requires collaboration across multiple structures, sectors and organisations. The way collaboration is organised shapes action. And if the context is complex, then organising needs to be adaptive.
- 3 Leading systemic shifts is about collaborating, sharing power and distributing action. Governance models need to adapt to dynamic action and collaborative leading.
- 4 Data is critical, but let’s be clear about the type of data that is needed and how it is used. Action towards systemic change in human systems requires human-centred, lead data.

# 1

**Human systems are  
complex and dynamic.**

**When we are working in  
complex domains, we need  
to ‘learn forward’.**

Calls for ‘systems change’ seem to be everywhere. Funders are seeking deeper change. Governments are looking at transitions and transformations. Change-makers are committed to shifting things upstream rather than putting band-aids on symptoms downstream.

Many proponents suggest starting with ‘understanding the system’. This inevitably leads to systems mapping - trying to zoom out to see the ‘whole picture’. These maps are usually vivid depictions of how everything is interconnected.

The goal of the Zero initiatives in Brisbane and Logan is to reduce, prevent and ultimately end homelessness. And if we were to map ‘the’ system underpinning this goal it might look something like Figure 1.

We often hear comments like, ‘if you want to end homelessness then you need to start with addressing population growth or changing the housing market’. Yet as is clear here, these are only two of the many interconnected fields contributing to homelessness. And this depiction is only a small representation of what actually influences and shapes homelessness.

For anyone not involved in the mapping process, systems maps such as this can be overwhelming, indecipherable, abstract and hard to grapple with in practical terms. At The Good Shift we have experienced this and are therefore cautious about starting with systems maps or seeking to ‘understand the system’ when speaking of shifting systems that are complex and involve human or social systems- for three key reasons.

1. **Human and social systems maps are not actual ‘representations’ of reality** - they are *reflections* of *our* (the map makers) understandings and assumptions about how things have come to be what they are. At The Good Shift, if we do ‘systems mapping’ we make sure not to create a single, aggregated map, but rather we have everyone draw their reflection of a ‘systems map’ so that the diversity of representations and

interpretations becomes clear. We avoid ‘mapping the system’ or using the map as the means to ‘interpret’ a system. We maintain that the map is not ‘the territory’, it is *a representation of an interpretation of a territory*. Therefore naming or sharing assumptions and highlighting different perspectives in mapping is a key part of the process.

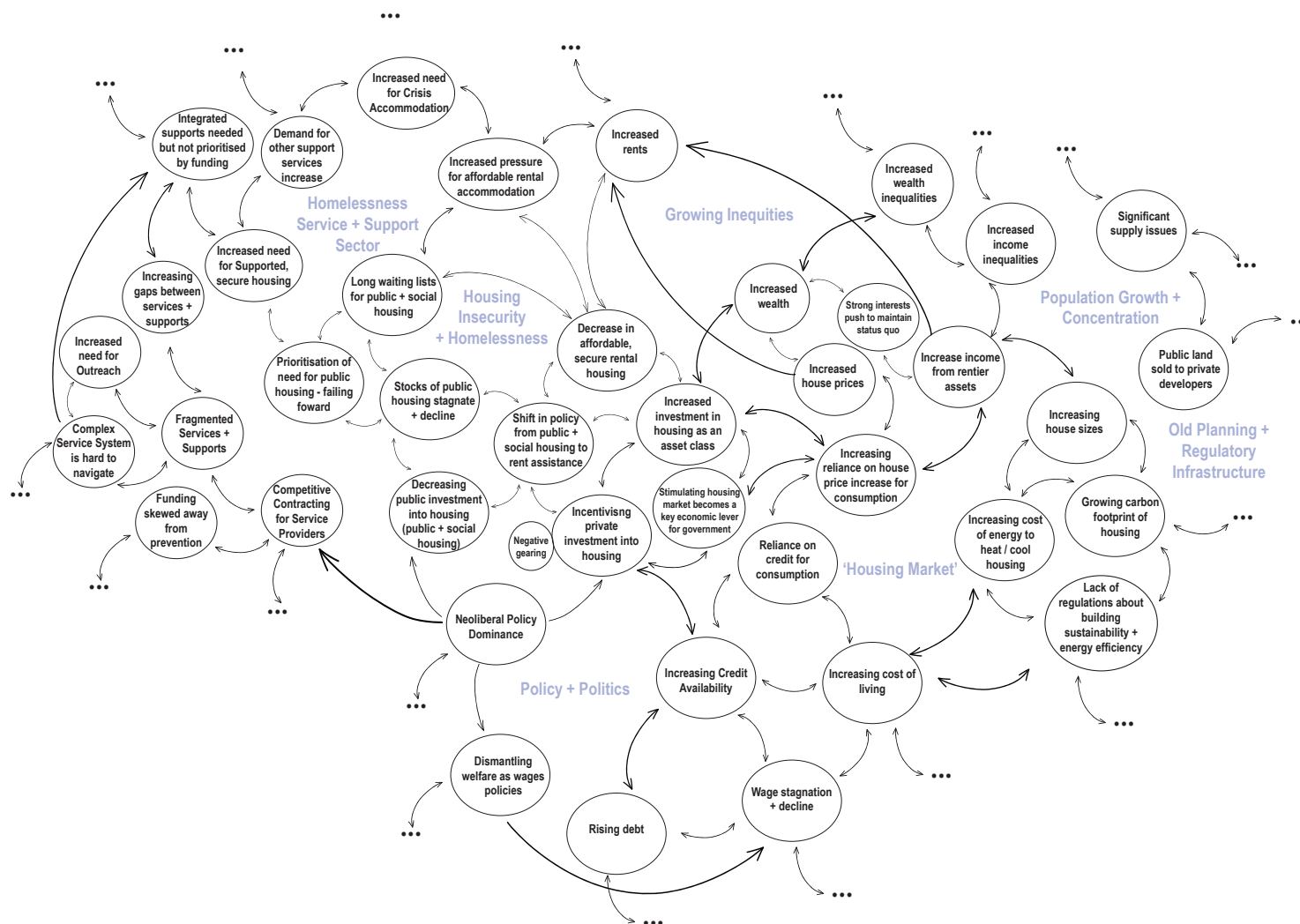


Figure 1: A ‘Systems Map’ depicting perspectives of what contributes to homelessness in the Australian context

## 2. Social systems are complex and dynamic.

So, even if you can put a boundary around a part of a system, this is only ever an abstract, static representation of the perspectives of those involved in the mapping process. While mapping can help us to 'zoom out' and look at a bigger picture, maps themselves can make us erroneously think that we can understand 'the whole'. This can lead to conclusions that if only we could pull a lever here, or push a strategy there, we will end up with wholesale change. There are no singular 'levers' in human, social systems.

Human social networks and societies are dynamic and alive, and the consequences of singular actions are less predictable. Though there may be some areas of action that could be more sensitive or potentially amplifying in terms of spreading change, this is often only clear in retrospective. Levers and sensitive intervention points, may be sites for testing and learning, but they are not 'quick fixes' in systems shifting work. So, we use mapping only as a means for sensemaking at a point in time. For this reason our systems maps are never laminated, displayed or presented as stable or static representations.

## 3. Human and social systems are not just about interconnected issues - they reflect entangled power relationships.

All the elements in the housing systems map on the previous page are subject to power dynamics, vested interests, politics and ideology. Shifting or influencing these dynamics requires engaging with power holders and social norms that hold power in place; and ultimately navigating and challenging institutional structures that embed power into civic and social infrastructure. At The Good Shift, if we are mapping systems, we emphasise that

we are doing so from particular social positions and that means making power relationships a key discussion throughout the process.

There is a tendency in many initiatives to focus on and start with the 'biggest, nastiest, hardest' elements in a system and we encounter people who argue that these represent the only valid spaces in which to act. However we have also learnt that starting in spaces that are too big, too hard or too entrenched, can be a recipe for disappointment and hopelessness. Alternatively, if we start with where the participants have some degree of power to influence change we can have much greater opportunities for early action and learning, and ultimately, momentum forward.

We are not suggesting that mapping is wrong or useless per se - only that we should be careful about

the overall purpose of systems maps and avoid claims that creating such maps leads to 'understanding the system'. This sort of mapping *can* help people get out of their comfort zones or enable teams get out of their siloes, but the important point is that this is about the value of a *process* (ie. mapping), not a *product* (ie. the map).

This also means we need to be clear about how we use mapping and maps - and what level of mapping helps us make sense of a context in terms of moving forward to action.

One of the frameworks we find very useful for supporting sensemaking in the territory of change is the Cynefin framework developed by Dave Snowden (see figure 2). This framework helps support decision-making when we are thinking about whether and how mapping is an appropriate place to start.

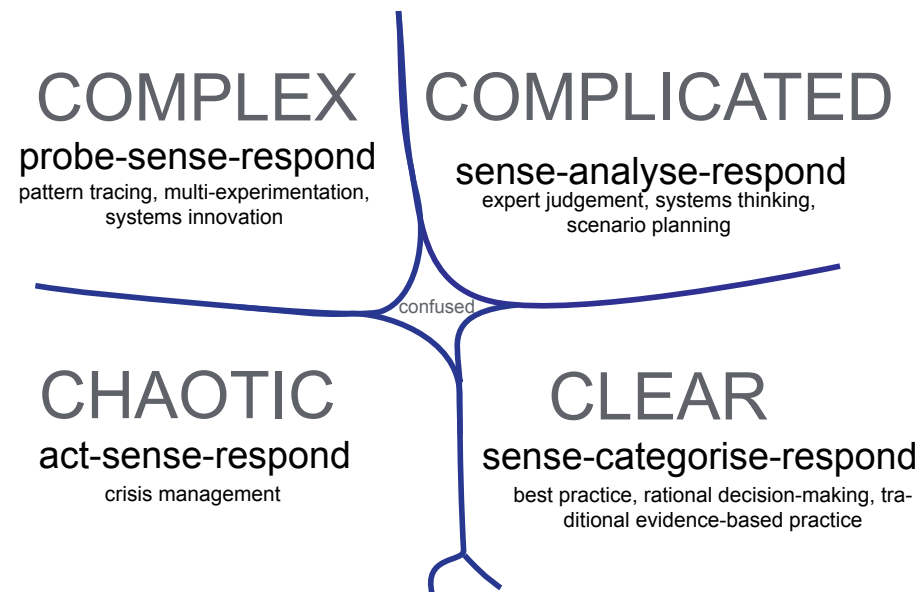


Figure 2: The Cynefin framework (source: [Dave Snowden The Cynefin.Co](#))

Snowden (2007) argues for action rhythms in complex action domains that emphasise: probe, sense, respond approaches. We can absolutely engage in mapping processes - but we need to start this with the understanding that this is a probe - an exploration, experiment or test that can provide us the opportunity to make visible, explore and test our initial assumptions.

When the domain of action is complicated, the action rhythm can be summarised as ‘sense-analyse-respond’. In complicated contexts, the boundaries of an issue are often clearer, and systems mapping can help us to understand and analyse how we might

respond. However, in complex domains, things are unordered and change becomes less predictable.

### Starting with Human Experiences

Another thing we often hear is that ‘systems are not real’ - they are just mental constructs that help us make sense of the world. We agree. However - we also suggest that *people experience ‘systems’ on a daily basis*. And if we start with narratives and mapping of people’s experiences (rather than abstract ‘systems’) we can build up ‘pictures’ of systems that give us another window into the complex entanglements of structures that underpin issues such as ‘homelessness’. Further, when it comes to

issues such as homelessness, people’s experiences are never limited to one sector and nor does the responsibility for change sit with one department or one organisation. People’s experiences are often a good representation of the breadth and entanglement of ‘systems’ beyond issues or structures.

Figure 3 illustrates one person’s experience across multiple structures and systems, indicating the breadth and depth of exploring systemic change as it relates to homelessness. Of course we are not speaking here of individualising change processes, rather, about starting with the reality of how people experience systems rather than abstracted representations of systems.

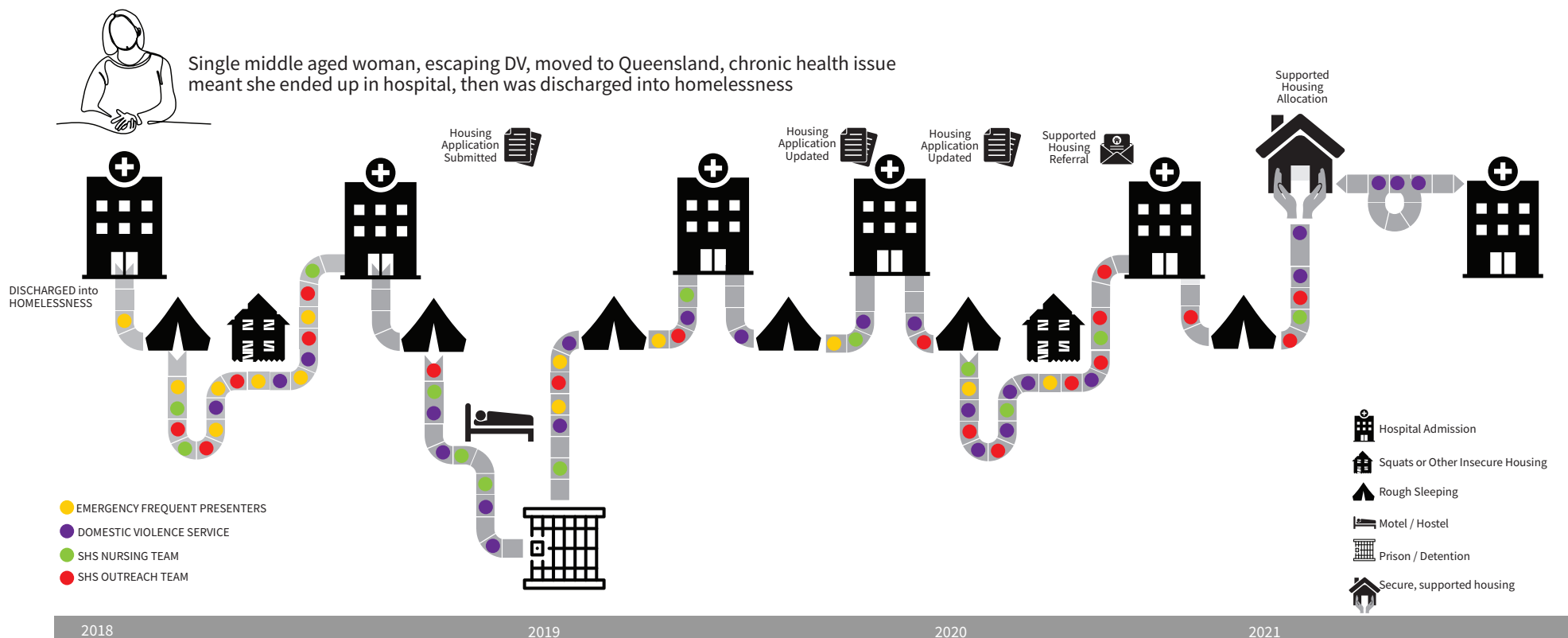


Figure 3: Journey Map of a person’s experience of a homelessness ‘system’ as a starting point (Source: Brisbane Zero, used with permission).



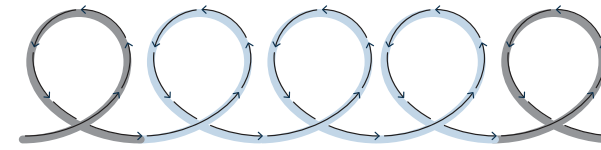
### Learning in + through action is critical

One of the cautions of starting with the assumption that we can ‘understand the system’ and ‘identify levers that could shift that system’ is that this pushes us to a logical planning frame of reference. If we can ‘understand’ first, then we will be in a position to ‘act’ most effectively and efficiently. Unfortunately, in complex contexts, this is a fallacy because things are dynamic, unknowns dominate, and ‘cause-and-effect’ are mostly only knowable in retrospect (Snowden, [2021](#)).

Instead, when we are grappling with shifting complex human ‘systems’ (even at the level of teams, families, organisations - let alone at the level of society) starting with small actions as learning probes, helps us to ‘learn forward’. ‘Learning’ here refers not to absorption of knowledge, but rather to action and reflection in practice, so that we can take better next steps forward (see our definition of learning in figure 4).

Learning here involves actively trying and testing out possibilities and making sense of the results in order to learn forward. So it is not like ‘formal’ or ‘rote’ learning where there is an accepted piece of knowledge or skillset that can be acquired through repetition or dialogue. Rather, this is active, exploratory and reflective learning that happens when the knowledge or skills are unknown in a context and we need to adopt a more exploratory, testing approach to working out the next steps.

We tend to use a ‘looping’ process that generates feedback or learning loops that can support credible, appropriate or informed next steps. These learning loops are about taking considered actions in order to actively test assumptions. The tests generate ‘actionable’ insights - what happened, what resulted,



# Learning

## Continuous Collective Processes

*Systematic  
Reflective*

*Social  
Relational*

*Loops  
Rhythms*

**through which we aim to  
make sense of**

*Distill  
Incorporate  
Capture*

**insights**

*Knowledge  
Data*

**from past and emerging  
experiences**

*actions  
re-searches*

**to actively  
inform**

*guide  
shape*

**better next steps  
and further actions.**

Figure 4: Defining ‘learning’ in the context of change processes



how did that shape our understanding, and how might that inform the next steps we could take in action? Processes that we instigate to reflect on and make sense of these insights help us to learn in order to take the next steps forward.

In figure 5 we have illustrated some elements of a 'learning loop'. Learning loops are not necessarily straight-forward, singular or sequential.

They can loop around and across particular 'steps' (for example, we often find that we spend more time in the initial probing and exploration phases to really understand what assumptions we could be testing). They can be multiple, parallel and sit at different 'levels' of a context.

Importantly, learning probes are most likely to generate momentum if they are embedded in some form of 'learning' framework. This could be a rhythm (eg. a learning log); an interactive reflection (eg. a team reflection cycle); or something much more rigorous (eg. a learning system - see for example the [Human.Learning.Systems](#) developed by Toby Lowe and colleagues).

The important thing is that this is a looped and continuous process that is collective in nature. This is not a 'phase' or a one-off process. It is a continuous learning approach to generate and support forward momentum in complex change work. It helps us to ask constantly:

***What are we learning that helps us take the next best step to navigate in the direction of what we are wanting to shift or change?***

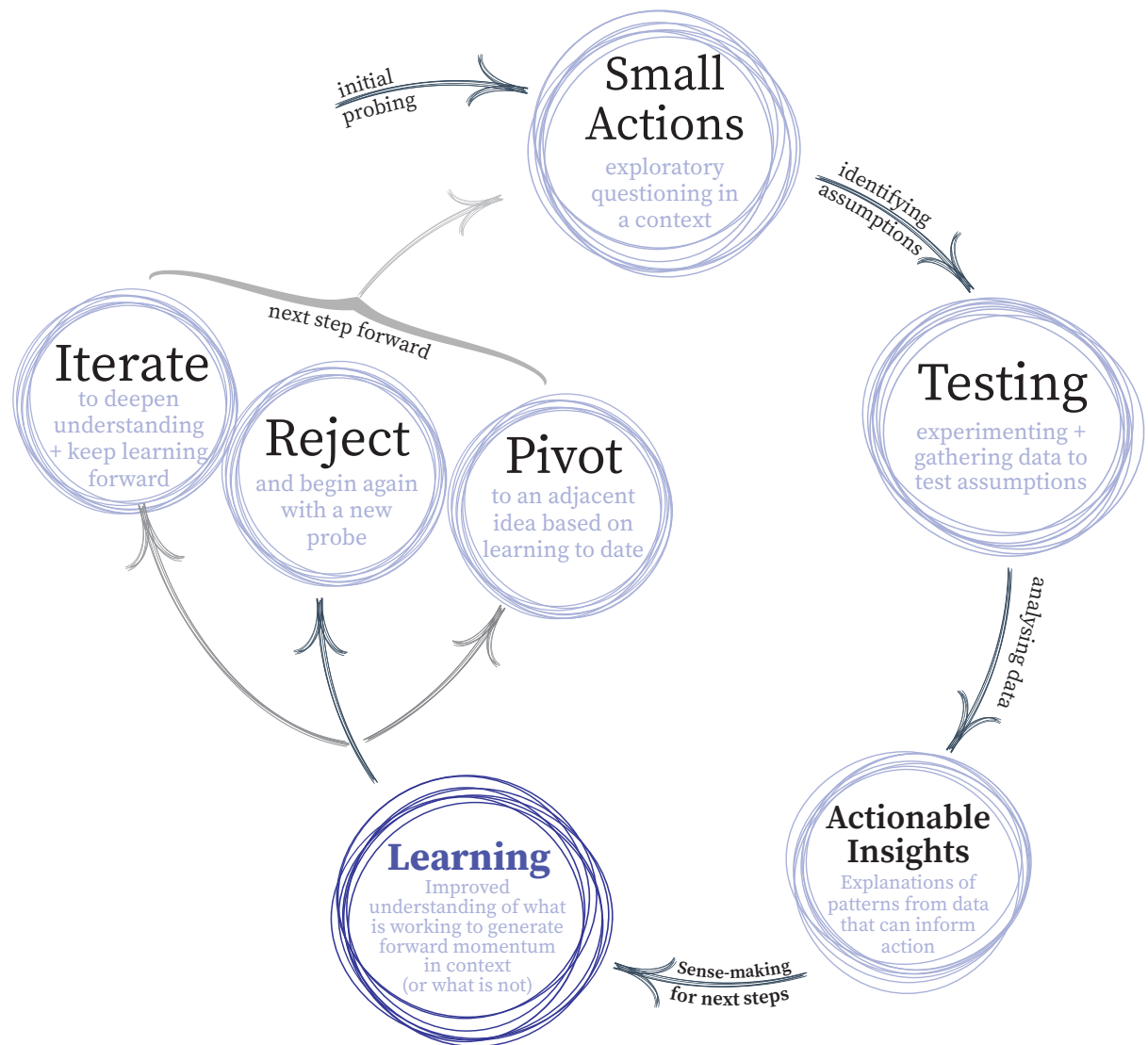


Figure 5: Elements of a learning loop

# 2

**Shifting systems requires collaboration across multiple structures, sectors and organisations. The way collaboration is organised shapes action.**

**And if the context is complex, then organising needs to be adaptive.**

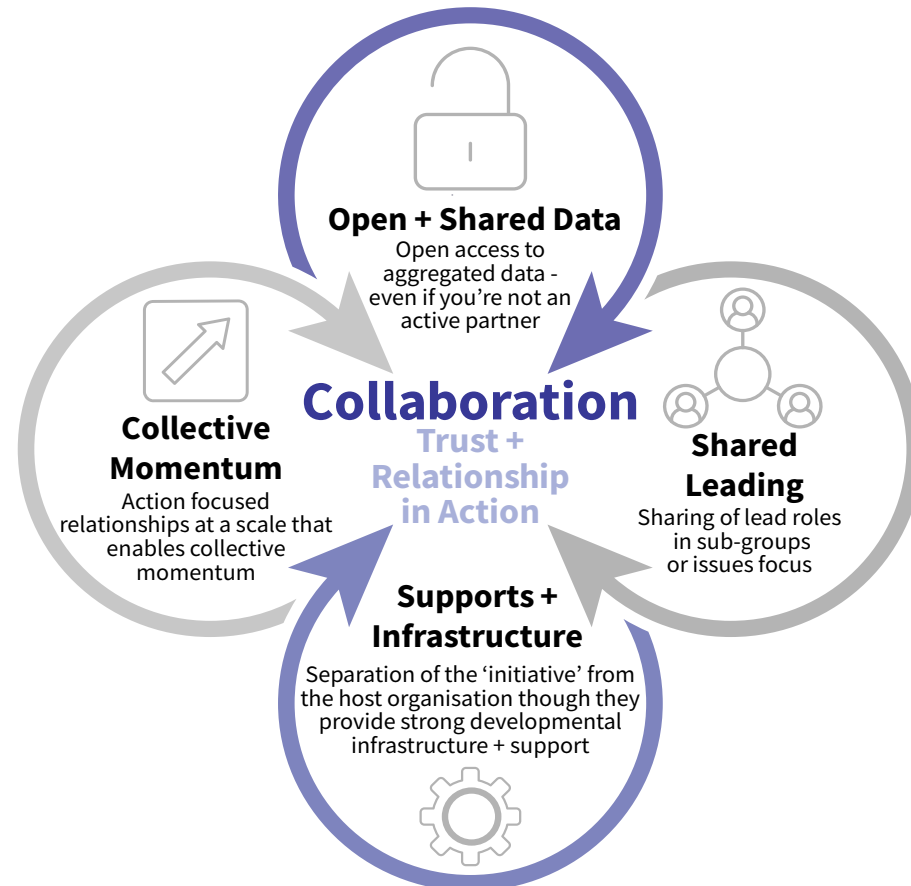
Shifting systems requires collaborative action by many, across organisations, sectors and at different levels of activity. A clear learning from the Zero initiatives in Brisbane and Logan is that the ‘organising’ of collaboration (how we structure the practices, processes and structures of collaboration) lies at the heart of any contribution this can make to systemic change. There were two core layers to this learning that we will explore below:

- **Collaboration is contextual:** we need to grow frameworks of collaboration out of practice rather than ‘one-size fits all’ models. We also need to recognise that in practice collaboration sits alongside other relational realities like competition.
- **Collaboration is dynamic:** it ebbs and flows across systems and organisations. Understanding conditions that enable and support collaboration across different parts and stages of a process is important.

### Collaboration is contextual

There are many courses, books, research papers on collaboration which describe it as a set of skills and a body of practical knowledge. Importantly though, how it starts and develops over time is also very **contextual**. So applying context-free frameworks to understand collaboration should be done with care and caution. The development of conditions that support collaboration are dependent on the purpose and depth of relationship needed, the nature of the intended change, and the power dynamics of participants involved in collaboration.

At its heart, collaboration is about growing trust and relationship in action (see figure 6) - and what supports this differs across contexts. In this initiative the elements that supported a growth of trust and relationship between organisations and people in



**Figure 6: Elements supporting collaboration in the context of Brisbane and Logan Zero**

those organisations over time included:

- The experience of contributing to and benefiting from the multiplier effects of a shared resource (in this case, the creation of a **shared and open data set**);
- Experiencing a growing sense of **collective momentum** that indicates the value of collaboration over individual and organisational action;
- Developing a stronger commitment to **shared leading** so that action became more distributed and participation in the decision-making started to be shared;
- Distinguishing the collaborative initiative from the brand of the key supporting organisation over time, so that there has been less dependence on a centralised intermediary (this is of course a work in progress - as are the elements!).

There will be other elements that are important in other contexts. Unpacking and discovering the elements that are critical for collaborative action in each context is a core part of any systemic work.

Similarly, codifying what collaboration looks like, how it works and what it means needs a contextual foundation. When we first began this project we were asked for a definition of and a framework for collaboration to support systemic change. Ofcourse, there is a great literature of definitions, models, approaches to collaboration.

However, given our experience in other contexts where 'one-size all models' have struggled to really shift entrenched patterns of behaviour, we proposed that we would develop a collaboration framework from and for this context out of the work (starting in practice and context and then building towards theory).

We could see from early interactions that 'collaboration' in this context and for this initiative, was a contested idea. Some of those we spoke with even disputed that any kind of collaboration could be achieved under conditions where key actors (providers of specialist homelessness services) were funded through competitive tendering arrangements.

In the process of developing the work and the framework, what was clear was that competition between organisations was real, and influenced how they could or would collaborate. Too often in multi-party work competition and collaboration are seen as opposites. In practice though, both competition and collaboration play a role in creating momentum towards any kind of collective purpose or goal.

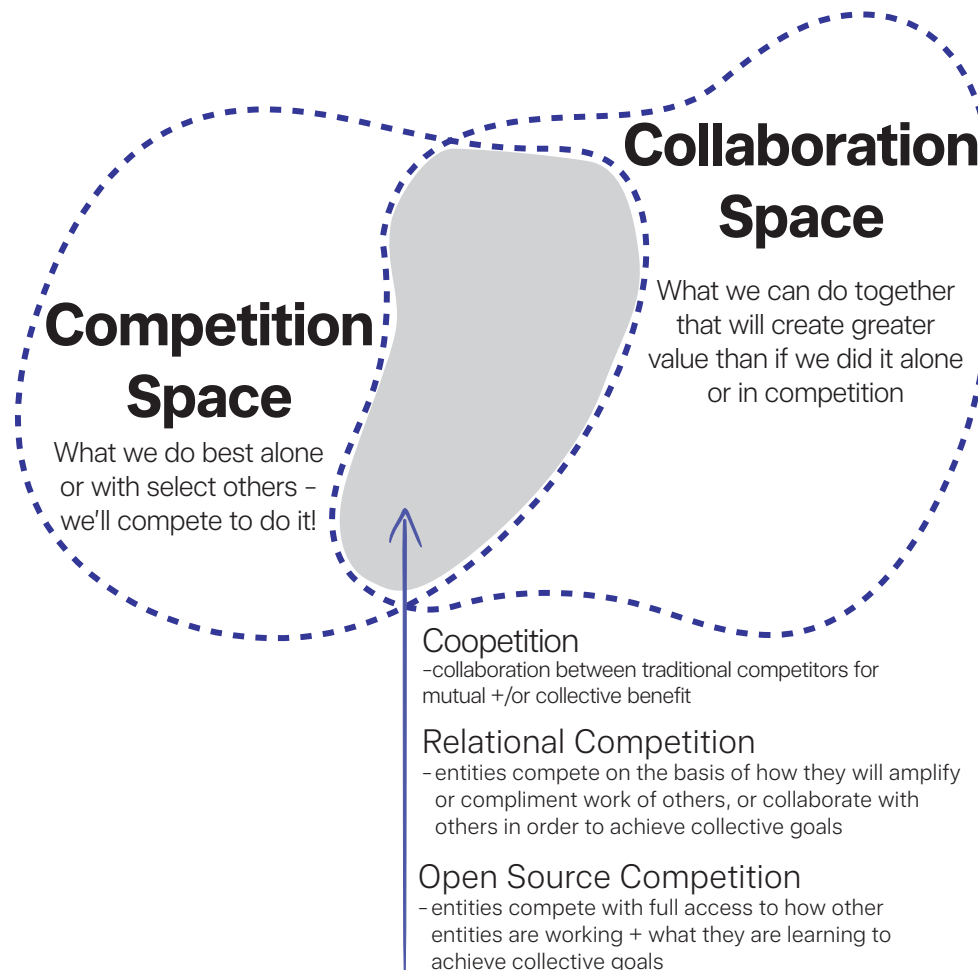
However when new infrastructure and new resources are put on the table, there can be both explicit and implicit tendencies to seek the security a

binary position from stakeholders - it's either about collaboration or competition and everyone should choose a side.

In contexts like this, we need a more sophisticated understanding that both competition and collaboration are important and can co-exist across sectors and amongst actors. There will be areas in which organisations or initiatives compete (and

where some are better placed than others to make a contribution), and there will be areas where it makes sense to collaborate.

Further, it becomes important to recognise and appreciate how these seeming opposites can combine and be negotiated to create new perspectives and opportunities - as illustrated in Figure 7.



**Figure 7: Opportunities in the intersections between Competition and Collaboration**

Creating working frameworks from within contexts and as part of the work can be extremely helpful when conditions are complex. This can help to:

- ground the framework in the practice experiences, so people recognise themselves and the work in the framework;

- generate collective learning and reflection in a process;
- ensure that the framework reflects nuances of the context and work rather than the work being 'fitted' into a framework.

The collaboration framework presented in figure 8 grew out of the development of the initiatives' practices over two years. We are not suggesting that this be seen as a new universalisable framework, merely that it represents a collaboration for system change framework that works in this context (though of course it will also iterate over time).

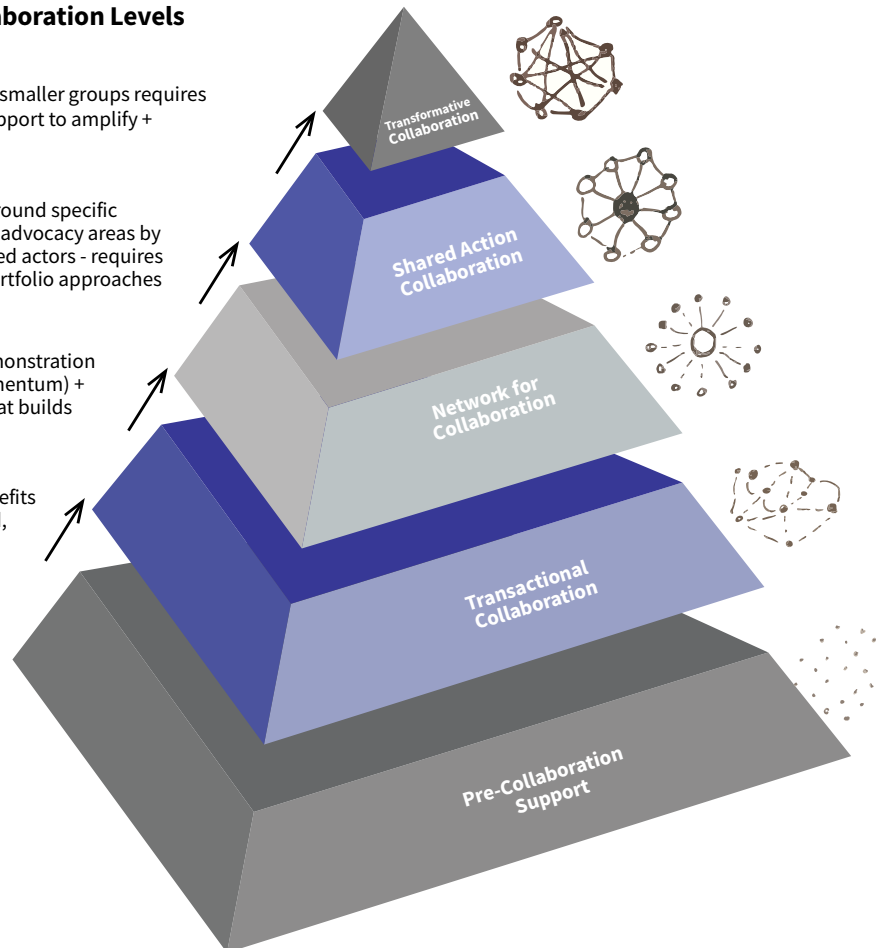
### Moving Up the Collaboration Levels

Interconnectivity between smaller groups requires collective governance + support to amplify + elevate results

Stronger focus on action around specific elements - cohorts, issues, advocacy areas by smaller groups of committed actors - requires distributed leadership + portfolio approaches

Stronger trust + action demonstration (eg. evidence of some momentum) + relational infrastructure that builds commitment

Addition of some clear benefits to participation (eg. shared, open data) + evidence of changed conditions (eg. commitment to a shared agenda building process)



### Defining Features

Inter-connected tight, close networks with high trust who coordinate clear agenda setting + actions

Focused groups, tight organisation, open to new engagement but with clear expectations, high trust groups

Loose + open groups, but often with strong relationships that encourage participation + attraction of actors with high commitment + capability to contribute

Loose + open groups, but commitment is generated through signed agreements + some common goals (often supported with training)

Loose, porous groups, shared goals but not always shared agenda about how to achieve those goals

### Defining Processes

Commitment to + active participation in systemic advocacy + use of data + collective decision-making to shift systems

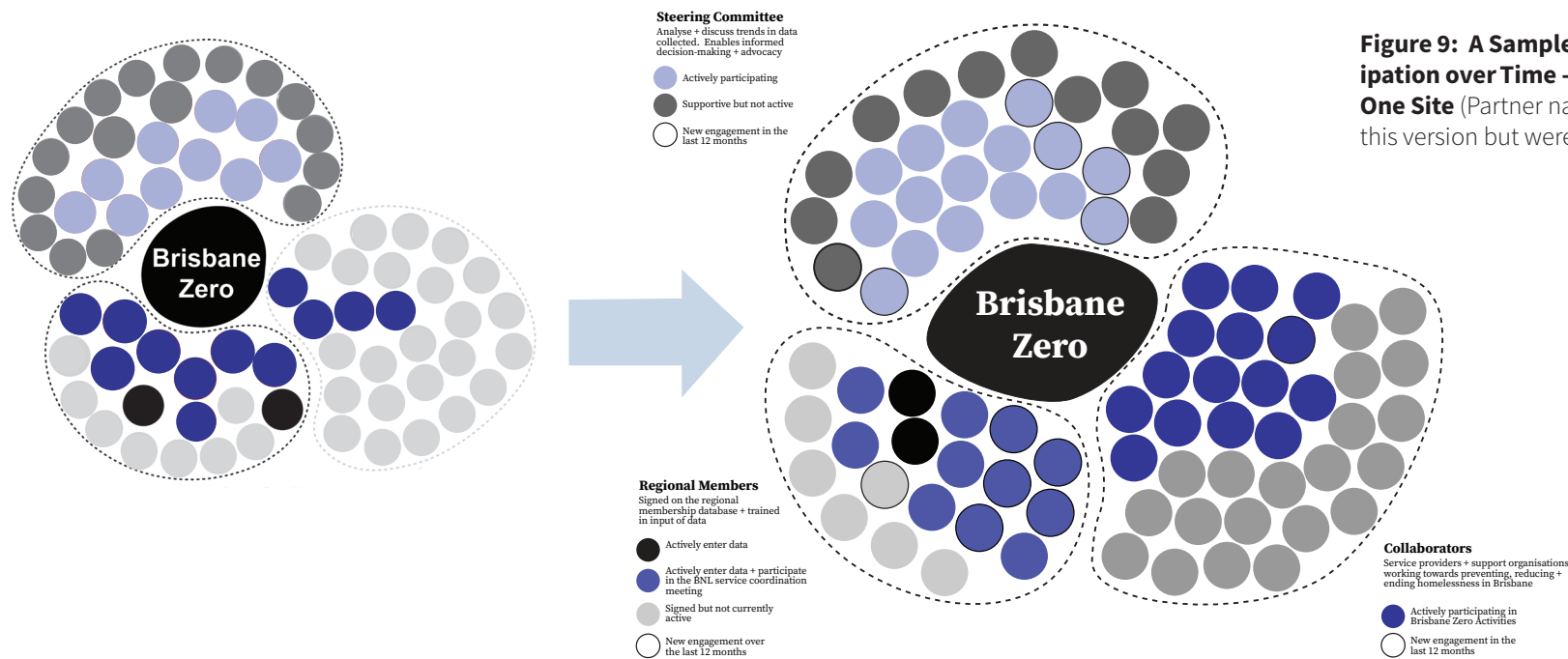
Active participation in singular action areas that could improve outcomes or shape practice for specific cohorts or in specific contexts

Participation in coordination meetings, analysis of trends in data + broad decision-making around shared use of data, without commitment to joint actions

Signing on to agreements + fulfilling shared data collection obligations - little engagement beyond collecting + sharing data

Working in the same sector, supporting the goals but not actively participating the collaboration to achieve those goals

Figure 8: A Contextually Developed Framework for Collaboration in the Brisbane and Logan Zero Projects



**Figure 9: A Sample Visual Map of Partner Participation over Time - Shifts in a Two Year Period in One Site** (Partner names have been removed from this version but were visible in learning reports)

## Collaboration is dynamic

In the early days of this project, a large number of 'partners' were listed on the website, indicating a strong collaborative commitment. However, on exploring the collaboration further, we found a large number of these 'partners' were either inactive, or only offering support in minimal ways. This is not unique to this initiative - so many of the systems change initiatives we work with seem, on first glance, to have enviable numbers of partners and collaborators - only to find that many of these are performative partners rather than real collaborators.

One of our insights over time has been that collaboration also requires a learning approach. The processes of collaborative action for systemic shifts

requires trying, testing and learning. Too many systemic change initiatives focus the learning on the 'beneficiary' side of the action not on the side of the partnership or the 'actors' involved. However, in all the work we have undertaken over the past decade, it has been clear that better outcomes require better partnerships, better collaborations, better processes of change and improved structural equity.

So we need to learn into, track and monitor progress not only what is happening externally, but also, internally in the partnerships and organisations and structures who are initiating the change work.

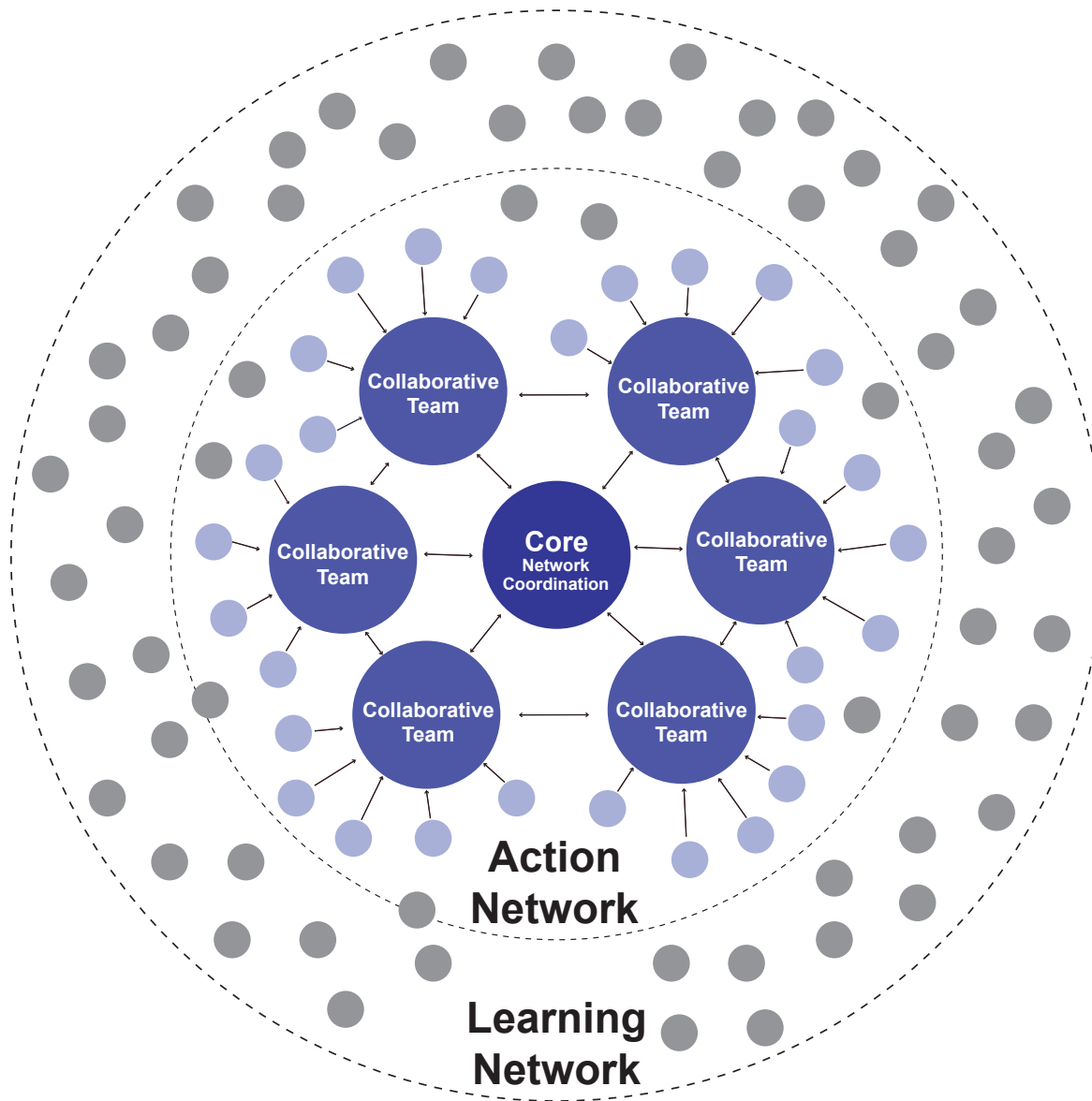
One way to do this is to map the nature of actual participation and collaboration (see figure 9 for an example of such a mapping output) - and then to test

and learn how different strategies can grow greater levels of participation over time.

Over time the projects grew strong participation and collaboration - but what also became clear was that collaboration needs to be resourced. Early in the initiative this resourcing centred on ensuring that all participants had the training and technical support to contribute to entering and using data. Later it shifted to supporting organisations to participate in collective learning, data analysis and actions/ advocacy.

Throughout the initiative, however, it was clear that 'collaboration' didn't just happen without some kind of resourcing.





**Figure 10: Collaboration Networks can be ‘Hybrid’, including Action Teams and a Learning Network**

source: Spence, M., Ehrlichman, D., & Sawyer, D. (2018). Cutting Through the Complexity: A Roadmap for Effective Collaboration. Stanford Social Innovation Review

It remains the case that despite recognition of the critical value of collaboration in shifting systems, few funders understand the work needed to scaffold real collaboration, and even fewer actually fund it. And yet, in our experience, intentional investment into supporting and scaffolding the ‘nitty gritty’ of collaboration activities delivers real outcomes. Further, these outcomes have potential to generate significant ‘savings returns’ both for people and for service systems (and therefore, ultimately, the funding bodies).

Our second learning around the dynamism of collaboration centred around the shifting nature of participation across the initiative over time. Despite sounding somewhat onerous, there was an underlying assumption in this initiative (as we know there are in many), that you were either ‘in’ or ‘out’ - collaborating fully, or not collaborating. But the reality was much more fluid than this. Sometimes there was both energy and motivation of people and organisations to participate in the core of the network. At other times the energy was directed more to the specific action focused collaborative teams. And sometimes there was no capacity or motivation to actively participate in the collaboration but a strong desire to remain associated and learn from the initiative.

This reflected something we had seen in the work of David Ehrlichman and his colleagues (see Spence et al, 2018 for example), that collaboration networks can benefit from ‘hybrid’ inclusion, where it is recognised and appreciated that those focused on action and those learning can shift and change over time, as illustrated in Figure 10.

In the next section we will reflect on a related aspect of the work, how collaboration can be nurtured through different forms of governance and leadership (or *leading* to turn it into a verb) approaches.



# 3

**Leading systemic shifts is about collaborating, sharing power and distributing action.**

**Governance models need to adapt to dynamic action and collaborative leading.**

In the previous section we highlighted that collaboration requires both resourcing and scaffolding. Often it is assumed that the scaffolding needs can be covered by clear and tight governance. However, in large, multi-actor initiatives a focus on governance can soon result in too much energy going to organising, and too little towards actions that generate change. The leaders of the Zero initiatives in Brisbane and Logan wanted to distinguish between ‘governance and ‘leading’ (as illustrated in figure 11).

As one of the original leaders in this initiative argued:

*“Governance is code for committee meetings - we end up in loads of meetings and nothing moves forward. We want to create shared leading, not overburden everyone with more governance”*

Over the course of the initiative there have been many learnings about what this means in practice. We will explore two here:

- The structure of collaboration can generate opportunities for collective leading;
- In a networked approach, micro-practices are critical to grow shared and distributed leading: this creates an environment where ‘governance’ can enable rather than control action in a direction of travel.

### Structuring collaborative initiatives for shared leadership

Many frameworks that explore how we could shift systems propose setting a goal, and then coordinating actors so that they set a collective course towards achieving that goal. This approach focuses on aligning actions, then tracking progress towards a common goal (which is usually framed as a destination). From this perspective the core of systemic change work centres on coordination of

collective action - which has to be managed, usually by an intermediary, often referred to as a ‘backbone organisation’. This approach represents a theory of action that is ‘structured’.

This structured approach works well in contexts where most strategies and actions are well tested and the ‘knowns’ of how to generate change outweigh the ‘unknowns’. However, when the context is complex and there is less alignment and more ‘unknowns’ around how to generate change, this sort of approach is less effective.

What is needed in complex contexts of change is an approach that is less structured and more networked, where leadership is more distributed, and the focus is

on creating coherence around learning forward in the direction of the goal. The difference between these two approaches to action - structured and networked - is illustrated in Figure 12 on the next page.

In Australia, the structured approach is more common (due in part to the broader adoption of ‘collective impact’ approaches). Such approaches can be less effective in contexts that are complex, such as is the case of addressing homelessness, which spans many sectors, departments, organisations and experiences. Whilst the two approaches should not be considered mutually exclusive, we should recognise the contexts in which merely adopting a ‘structured’ approach will be less likely to yield systemic shifts.

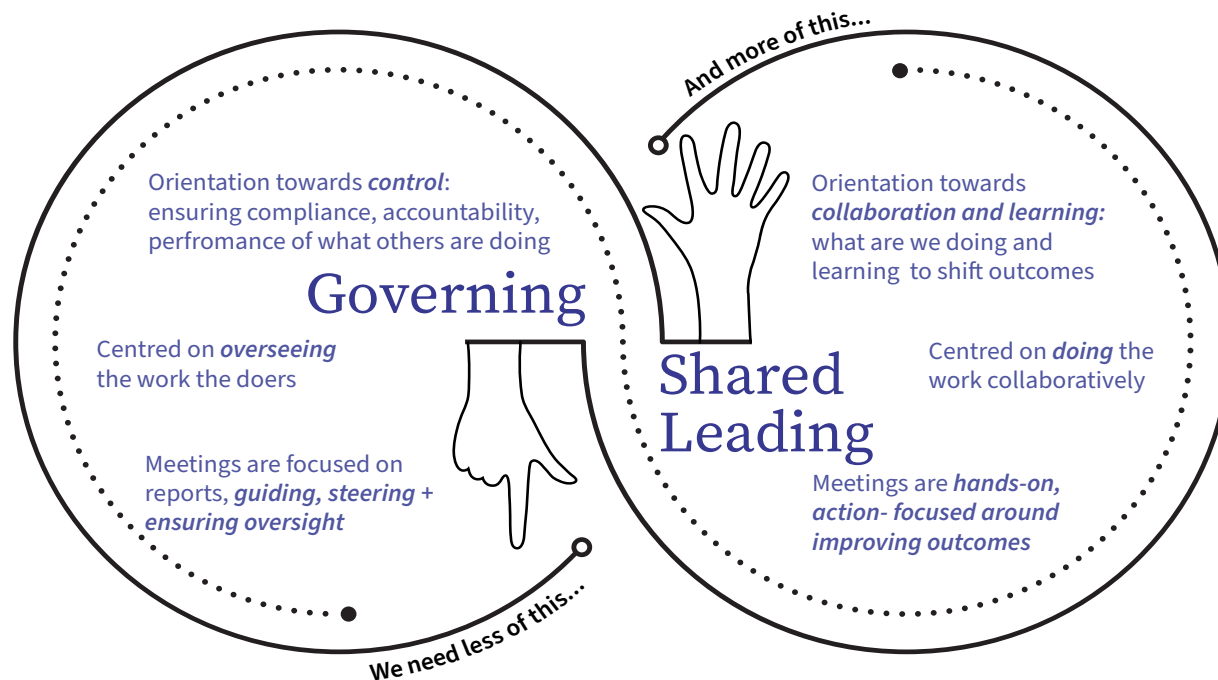
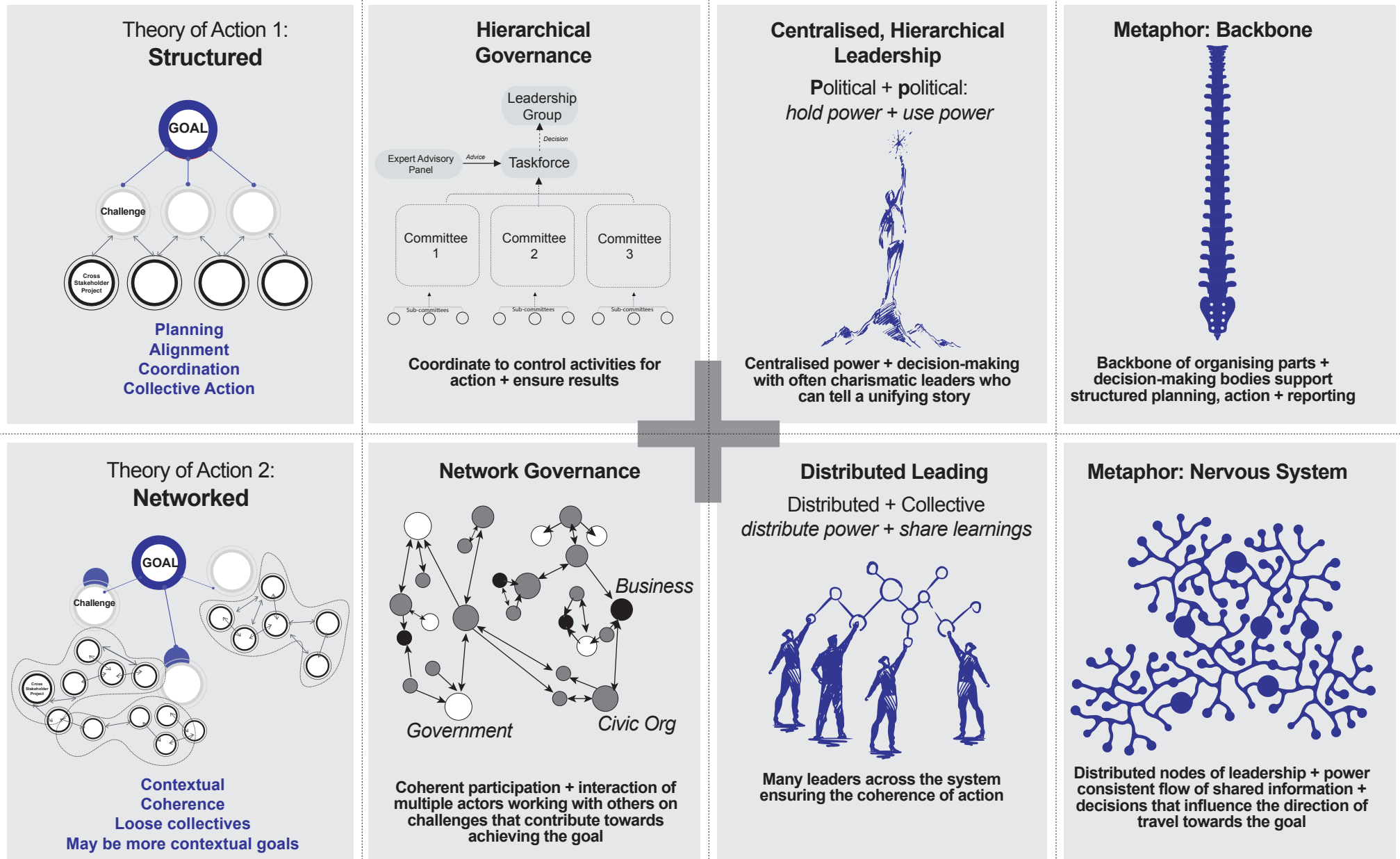


Figure 11: Distinguishing between Governing Approaches and ‘Shared Leading’ Approaches



**Figure 12: Distinguishing Structured and Networked Theories of Action** (though as the plus symbol between them indicates, integration is also possible and being explored)

The Zero approaches in Brisbane and Logan have tended more towards a networked approach than a structured approach. The approaches are not mutually exclusive however, and some integration is possible. We are currently exploring such integration in other projects.

One way to explore a 'networked' theory of action is through Challenge-led Innovation frameworks, which help us explore the range of interconnected innovations and relationships that could enable us take steps in the direction of a broad goal (see figure 13).

While the Zero initiatives didn't formally follow this framework many of the ideas underpinning it have direct applicability to addressing complex and intersectional issues such as homelessness.

In Challenge-led approaches the goal is *directional*, there are challenges that sit below this goal that represent coherent fields of action and innovation that could create momentum in the direction of the goal, and then portfolios of projects that are designed to help us learn forward.

The portfolios represent the networked approaches adopted by groups of people who are testing and learning how to move forwards in the direction of the goal.

This way of working starts with the premise that we need many ideas, probes, sites of learning and a diversity of approaches if we are to develop promising practices that help us move forward. It is also underpinned by the belief in multitude of leaders and leading rather than singular bodies or backbones holding core leadership roles and responsibilities.



**Figure 13: A Challenge-led Approach to the Zero process could reflect a Networked Theory of Action**

Starting to collaborate around a shared sense of direction (rather than a target or destination goal) opens up the potential for holding diverse approaches within a collaborative space. This means that the focus of collaboration is not agreeing 'how' we achieve the goal, only agreeing that we can try, test and learn in multiple ways in order to move in the direction of the goal.

Too much energy can be taken up in large scale change initiatives in efforts focused on building agreement on which method or approach is the 'best' or the most effective. Using a networked approach we don't have to agree on singular methods, just on that we seek to learn forward in the direction of the goal.

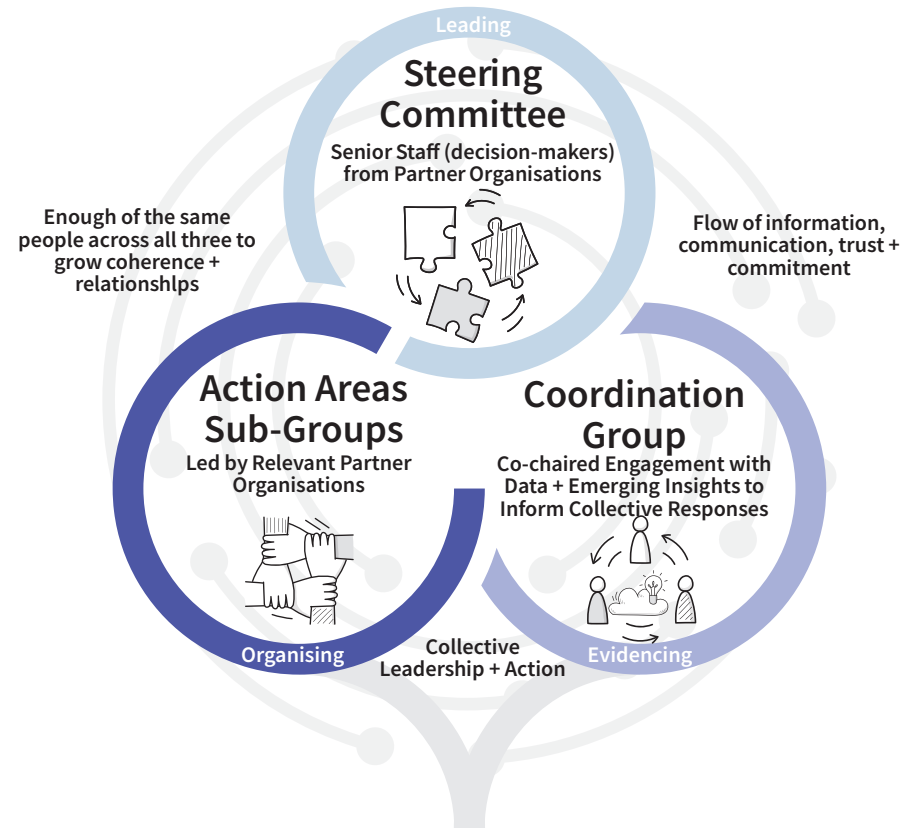
## Towards systems leading

The work of shifting systems requires many different ‘roles’ and small ‘actions’ across sectors, communities, organisations and teams to generate momentum towards systemic goals.

The spreading of energy and action across a network requires developing a sense of shared ownership and distributed leadership across an initiative. This doesn’t often happen through top down ‘design’ or decrees. It can, however be achieved through the cumulative effects of micropractices - as tiny as asking a partner organisation to co-chair a steering committee or another organisation offering to host a subgroup for specific action.

In the Zero initiatives we found some clear patterns that could help us think about how to grow collective and distributed leadership:

- Focusing more on ‘leading’ and less on ‘governing’ the initiative, which gives it more of a quality of a networked movement, rather than a structured body;
- Less ‘governing’ meetings about ‘managing’ the work and more focus on how to improve outcomes through connecting and leading around action;
- Initiating a flow of communication that focuses on sharing data and evidence to demonstrate both current state and momentum in the direction of the goal. In this way partners can see that there is momentum and see their part in this. This grows commitment and trust across the initiative;
- Putting less focus on a ‘backbone’ function and more focus on growing collective leading of action across the ecosystem, with leadership of the action centering on who is closest to the action



**Figure 14: The Leading, Organising + Evidencing Groups in Brisbane and Logan Zero Initiatives**

that needs to happen;

- Building-in a thickening of coherence and relationships across the ecosystem by ensuring that there is an overlapping of people across the networks and infrastructures. This requires a degree of resourcing, but it also builds in the connectivity that is needed in an ecosystem approach.
- Growing a collective approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation that grows both

engagement in action and learning across the ecosystem;

- Growing and adapting the infrastructure out of what makes sense from the action rather than structuring first and then fitting the action into the structure.
- Making the roles and responsibilities that emerge in systemic work ‘visible’ is important not only to make it clear that this work requires many hands, but also to demonstrate the changing

nature of the work over time. In contexts in which ‘individual’ efforts are celebrated and ‘branded’ activities are valued it can be difficult for collective efforts to be recognised inside or across organisations.

Figure 15 illustrates some of the principles and core conditions that are emerging from practice in the Zero initiatives to support this idea of ‘systems leading’. The challenge for truly embedding these principles however, extends beyond the life of the funded initiatives.

Currently, the initiatives are supported by an funded coordination body (like a backbone). While they are testing and learning about how to embed principles that take them beyond this body, it remains unclear how the core conditions needed to support the enactment of principles will be resourced once the funding ceases. The challenge then, is how to embed the functions and the principles of systems leading into BAU when they are not specifically resourced and therefore, unfortunately, often not made visible nor prioritised.

This is a challenge for many systemic change initiatives. Traditional funding models favour rigid, measurable outcomes in which activities are often well defined and programmatic in nature. What is clear in thses initiatives and other systemic change work we have explored, is that they require different methods of resourcing.

Funding needs to embrace the complexities and fluidities necessary for effective cross-organisational, and cross-sectoral systemic responses - and by its very nature this is going to necessitate trying, testing and learning approaches and exploratory activities rather than predefined programmatic approaches.



**Figure 15: Principles and Conditions of Systems Leading as demonstrated in the Zero initiatives**

# 4

**Data is critical, but let's be clear about the type of data that is needed and how it is used.**

**Action towards systemic change in human systems requires human-centred, lead data.**



Data is a critical element of the Advance to Zero Methodology which involves both data derived from a common triage tool and a quality, real-time by name list of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Data is used for triaging, tracking the achievement of individual outcomes and also for generating evidence about what's happening in particular contexts and for systems advocacy (see figure 16).

The data collected and used in the Zero initiatives has important characteristics:

1. The data focuses on the core of change efforts - that is, it reflects the:
  - individual needs of people experiencing homelessness;
  - outcomes of intervention;
  - barriers people experience;
  - contributors to homelessness;
  - gaps, needs for improvement or new approaches across the ecosystem of homelessness responses.
2. The data is collected at the front-line of the service system, directly from and with people experiencing homelessness and it is collected at the point of contact, so it is current rather than historical or retrospective data.
3. The aggregated data is shared in close to real time - that is, the narrative of the data is open for public, sector and policy engagement, everyone can 'see' what is happening - how many people are entering into homelessness, engaging with the service system, exiting into housing or not.
4. 'Analysis' and 'interpretation' of data to inform decision-making and action is a participatory process, involving those who are close to the level of action that is needed to shift outcomes or to inform advocacy.

One of the challenges often faced by those grappling with how data can help nudge, shift or transform systems centres on the nature of the data that is needed.

Too often the data that is presented is zoomed out population-level data, 'big' data aggregated from across data sets, or service data that looks back to what has shifted over time to make forward

facing decisions. Most data that is presented in the name of systemic change is 'lag' data - that is, it's a retrospective and historical.

It is also de-humanised, de-contextualised and aggregated to such a point that human experiences become lost in population statistics and the nuances of context or points of potential change are lost.

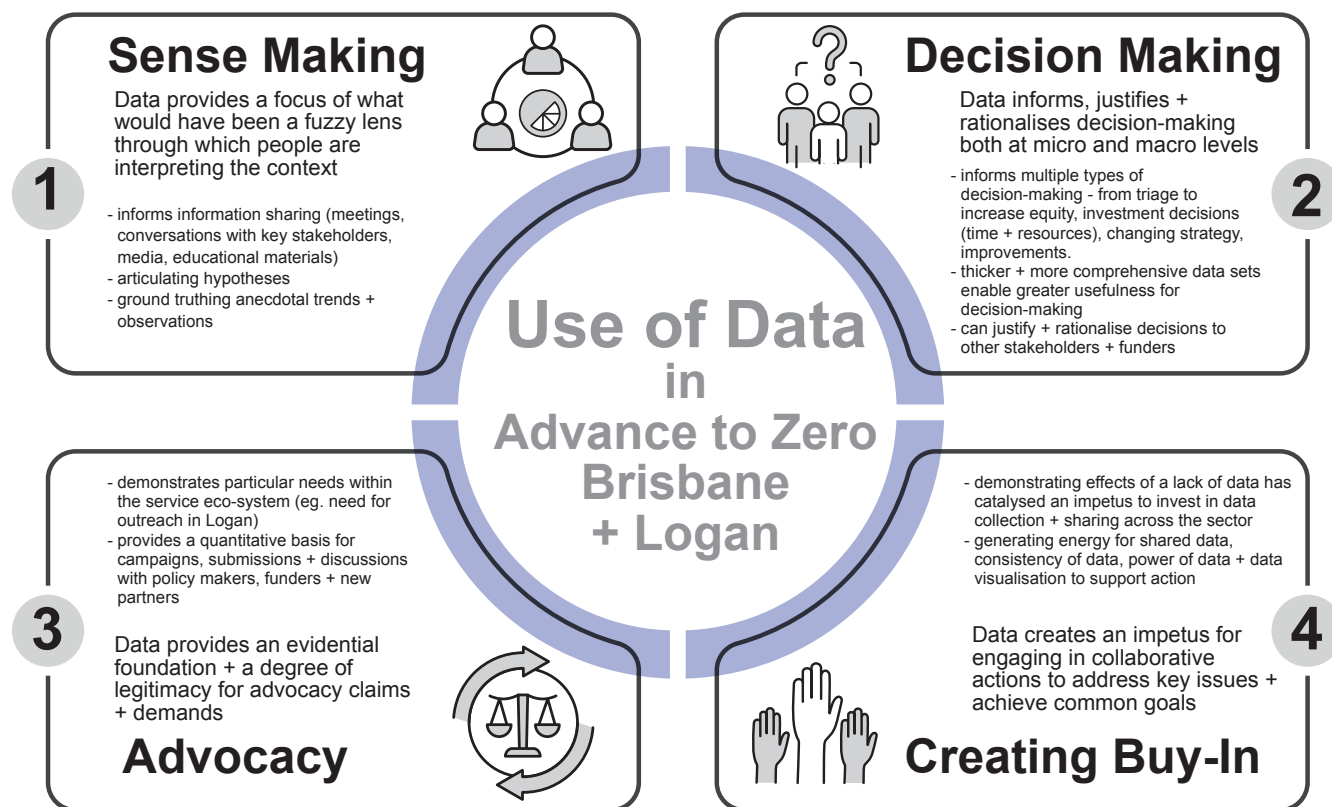
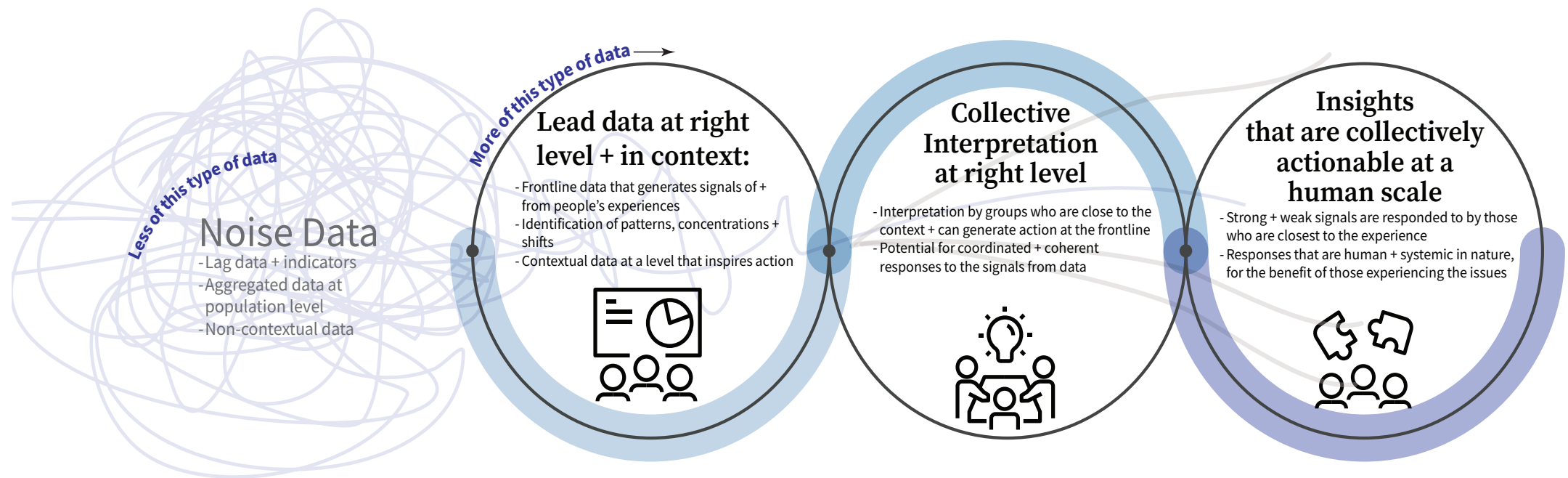


Figure 16: The Uses of Data in the Zero Initiatives



**Figure 17: Differentiating 'Noise' Data from the Data and Approach to Data that can Better Support Systemic Change Initiatives**

What is clear from this work is that we need to foster a different kind of data if we are to create both systemic (and structural) and human changes (see figure 17).

We need less data that generates 'noise' (lag data that fosters deficit thinking, hopelessness about the scale of problems, says nothing about contexts and focuses on aggregation over actionable insights).

We need to grow more lead data - which is current and relevant, that sits at a level which enables action, is contextual and can foster the integration of narrative and numbers.

The collective interpretation of data is also increasingly important as relying on external or 'expert' analysis too often forces abstraction or allows disconnection to practice to creep into what action is thought to be possible.

Relying less on 'experts' and more on diverse 'expertise' (that is, people who have expertise in a context, in relation to an issue, who are close to the frontline of data collection) in the interpretation enables data and action to be drawn closer together.

This lies at the heart of 'practice-based evidence' - that is, evidence that is drawn out of practice, and can generate more effective feedback loops into improving practice.

Finally, we need to think beyond data - towards how the right kinds of data can help us to generate actionable insights, and can help us detect strong and weak signals about what is happening at points close to the action.

Even when we have human-centred, contextual and 'lead' data, data on its own is not enough to either understand or change complex systemic issues such as homelessness.

Growing potential for action from data requires at least the elements depicted in Figure 18:

- **Generative Questions** that help us frame what to ask of, look for and analyse in the data - whilst also remaining open to surprises and becoming aware of anomalies;
- **Strong Data Sets**, and data scaffolding for digging deeper and for collectively analysing the data - which may include platforms, but also humans (or combinations of humans) who can help us to pick and see patterns, make connections and start to build effective data trails to support the development of actionable insights;
- **Infrastructure for organising action** in response to the data - from identifying actionable insights, to platforms for organising actors who are able to respond to those insights effectively - and keeping the energy flowing between data, insights and action; and
- **Frameworks and organising structures** to support both broader but coherent fields of action and learning portfolios that are convened by tighter groups of collaborators (see also Figure 13 for a deeper explanation of these terms).

The action that can result from combining these elements can influence change at structural, cohort or sub-group, individual and family levels (see Figure 19).

## Generative Question

To help focus in on what the data suggests is happening

"What is the data telling us about who is experiencing growing rates of homelessness - and why?"

## Actionable Insight

nuggets of interpretation that open up or indicate opportunities for action

"If we are to address homelessness in this context we need to connect up addressing domestic violence AND providing alternative accommodation for women + children"

## Challenge

Coherent field of action that will help us make progress on the issues + insights

"Preventing, reducing + ending homelessness amongst single mother households experiencing domestic violence and breakdown of relationships"

Data +  
Analysis

## Data Set + Analysis

The specific data that indicates + points to what is happening + for whom

"Single female headed families represent the majority of families experiencing homelessness, and violence + relationship breakdown is a factor in 3 out of four of these families experiencing homelessness"

Infrastructure  
for Action

## Portfolio of Actions

responding to the challenge + convened by a tight group of collaborators

Housing for Women's  
Safety + Security Alliance

Figure 18: Elements required to Turn Data into Action for Systemic Change

These in turn support steps towards ‘systemic changes’ through:

- increasing the ability of actors across a system to influence change structurally (for example by supporting advocacy);
- fostering behavioural changes across services (and more broadly in spaces like procurement and commissioning which directly shape many organisational behaviours; and
- support collective action and a shared sense of momentum across actors that can help to galvanise the need for and direction of systemic shifts.

Data, in and of itself, is often given too much credit for supporting systemic shifts. It is clear from this work (and many other spaces we have supported) that data alone is not enough.

We need an expanded view that challenges us to think about:

- what data is needed; AND
- what social infrastructures might support growing the depth, breadth and quality of the data sets and the collective processes needed to translate the data into actionable insights.

Data itself is just an indication of **what** is happening, not **how** we can generate changes.

This is particularly the case when those changes require shifts that are multi-faceted - that is they are simultaneously related to people, service approaches, practice frameworks, resourcing and policy decisions.

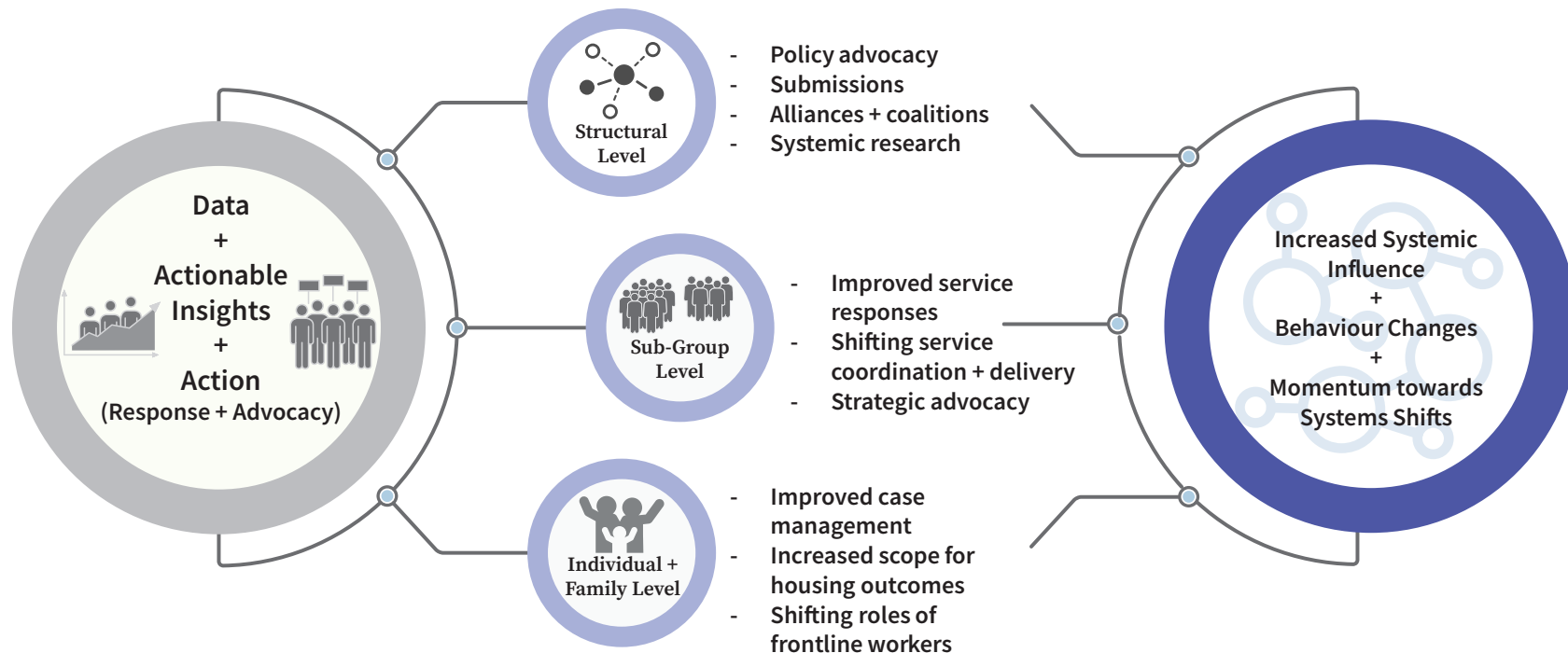


Figure 19: The Potential of Human Data and Actionable Insights for Broad, Systemic Action

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the good shift